

INTRODUCTION

We are in the midst of a significant reevaluation of the importance of cartoons and comic strips to American commerce, culture, and politics. A recent *New York Times* article, “Manga for Girls,” describes how a type of Japanese cartooning is capturing a vast new, young female audience in America.¹ In a hefty book—*The Complete Cartoons of the New Yorker*—literary luminaries such as John Updike and Calvin Trillin argue that cartoons are central to American culture. Both the *New York Times Magazine* and the *Los Angeles Times*’s Comics II section have introduced weekly cartoon strips featuring hard-hitting political and psychological insights aimed at adult readers. The increasingly popular genre of the graphic novel, as well as books on historical cartoons and comics are regularly reviewed in the *New York Times Book Review*. “Masters of American Cartooning,” an exhibit of the work of fifteen artists, opened in Los Angeles in 2005 and toured other cities through 2007. The *Virginia Quarterly Review* now publishes on a regular basis comics with discussions and analyses, chosen by contributing editor and cartoonist Ross MacDonald, and other erudite journals have focused on artists such as Will Eisner, Art Spiegelman, and Scott McCloud and how they have transformed comics into graphic narratives and essays.

But close readings of the comic form are not altogether new. Over the years many book-length histories of comic strips and cartoons have appeared, documenting with gusto the characters, stories, and art from drawing boards of a legion of comic artists over several hundred years of the form. For years, mainstream American newspaper comics of the 1940s and 1950s, like Al Capp’s *Li’l Abner* and Walt Kelly’s *Pogo*, have been collected, reprinted, and examined by popular culture scholars, as well as by social scientists and psychologists. Mary Petty, Helen E. Hokinson, and other women cartoonists whose work appeared in magazines such as the *New Yorker*, *Collier’s*, and the *Saturday Evening Post* have also been anthologized and made the subject of commentary. The life of at least one female newspaper cartoonist, Nell

Brinkley, has stirred sufficient interest for a book.² But largely missing from many of the scores of histories, retrospectives, and anthologies of comics and cartoons is work that documents and surveys the artistic production of African Americans.

Once a week in the mid-twentieth century African American families reading papers such as the *Pittsburgh Courier* and the *Chicago Defender* to catch up on the news would find in the funny papers a special take on the human comedy. As Langston Hughes noted in his column *Colored and Colorful* in the *Defender*, people looked forward to their favorite funnies: “If I were marooned on a desert island, . . . I would miss . . . Jackie Ormes’s cute drawings. . . .”³ After scanning headlines that were often distressing, readers could turn to the funnies to savor the conflicts and triumphs depicted by the papers’ black cartoonists, well spiced with irony and sweetened with humor.

Jackie Ormes has received modest attention in several anthologies and encyclopedias on notable women, as well as in African American *Who’s Who* volumes and reviews of women cartoonists, and there are creditable accounts of her life and work in two doll history books, but for the most part she has been incompletely studied. A few good articles have appeared that focus on Ormes’s later comic strip, *Torchy in Heartbeats*.⁴ These overviews devote most attention to the strip’s 1953–54 episode in which Torchy becomes an environmental muckraker and fighter for racial justice. In the course of researching this book I have discovered that some encyclopedia entries, articles, and obituaries contain inaccuracies that have unfortunately been perpetuated, vexing readers and biographers (see “Correcting the Record”).

I begin this study with an overview of Jackie Ormes’s life, from her birth in western Pennsylvania in 1911 to her death in Chicago in 1985, outlining the major events in her career and shedding light on her progressive social and political interests, subjects that have been mainly overlooked in previous accounts. Examining her intellectual life more closely will allow readers to make fresh appraisals of her work.

Subsequent chapters focus on newspaper comics, with special emphasis on the black press. *Torchy Brown* in “*Dixie to Harlem*,” Ormes’s first effort, ran for one year in the *Courier*, from May 1, 1937, to April 30, 1938. “*Dixie to Harlem*” was the comic strip story of a young Mississippi teen who found fame and fortune as an entertainer at New York’s

Cotton Club. Seven years later, Ormes's *Candy*, a single panel cartoon set at the home front of World War II and featuring a wisecracking housemaid, appeared in the *Defender* for four months, from March 24 to July 21, 1945. Ormes's longest running cartoon, *Patty-Jo 'n' Ginger*, was a big sister–little sister setup that featured gags about domestic life, while at the same time satirizing society and politics and protesting racial injustice. It ran in the *Courier* from September 1, 1945, until September 22, 1956. Her final comic strip, *Torchy in Heartbeats*, chronicled the adventures of a mature, independent woman who took on serious issues of race and environmental pollution as she sought true love.⁵ *Torchy in Heartbeats* ran in the *Courier* from August 19, 1950, until September 18, 1954.

Not all of Ormes's prodigious output could be reproduced in this book, due to space and financial constraints. The single panel *Patty-Jo 'n' Ginger* cartoon came out fifty-two weeks a year for eleven years, resulting in about five hundred *Patty-Jo* cartoons. The book, however, does contain a generous sample of cartoons and comic strips from *Torchy Brown in "Dixie to Harlem," Candy, Patty-Jo 'n' Ginger*, and *Torchy in Heartbeats*, as well as twenty-five original *Patty-Jo 'n' Ginger* drawings. Almost all of the comic strips and cartoons in the book are published here for the first time in over half a century. They have been chosen to illustrate Ormes's evolving artistic style and to represent the wide range of her interests as well as her ongoing commitment to social, political, and cultural issues. A comparatively large number of *Patty-Jo 'n' Ginger* cartoons are included because this cartoon series offered fascinating interpretations of numerous controversies from the postwar years 1945–56, and selections from the nearly five hundred cartoons were made on that basis. Readers will get only a glimpse of the multitude of *Patty-Jo 'n' Ginger* cartoons that dealt with humorous domestic situations, romance, and fashions.

Few of her contemporaries broadcast the kind of provocative messages in the pages of the funny papers as did Jackie Ormes. Even in her first professional effort, *Torchy Brown in "Dixie to Harlem,"* Ormes tells an uplifting story with extraordinary inventiveness. She chronicles Torchy's journey from the rural South to the urban North with charming drawings, lively dialogue, and humorous antics in an allegorical account of the Great Migration that had occurred in the

United States some twenty years before. The poor were a particular concern to Ormes, and she was probably the first cartoonist anywhere in the country to address industrial pollution's effects on underclass communities, as she did in *Torchy in Heartbeats*. In one episode, Ormes shows readers worried-looking African American mothers bringing their babies, sickened by toxic waste from a factory in the neighborhood, to a shabby, meager clinic—a comic-strip theme that was unheard of in its day.

In *Torchy in Heartbeats* and *Patty-Jo 'n' Ginger* Ormes's characters also directly confront racism. This book includes a Patty-Jo cartoon that attacks restrictive racial covenants, depicting five-year-old Patty-Jo challenging a little white girl who has excluded her from the neighborhood's "Little Lilly Club." Another has Patty-Jo warning of danger when a "little white tea-kettle just whistled at me," alluding to the murder of Emmett Till, which shocked the nation and galvanized the black community. Especially remarkable is the extent to which Ormes in *Patty-Jo 'n' Ginger* boldly critiques American foreign and domestic policy during the cold war years. One cartoon has Patty-Jo taking on the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) hearings that were taking place in Congress at the time: "You'll be glad we came as witches—wait an' see!" Patty-Jo says to Ginger at a Halloween party. "I understand some Hollywood scouts are simply HUNTING them these days!" But Ormes's interests and creative reach were amazingly broad, encompassing elements of glamour fantasy, romantic adventure, domestic humor, political satire, cultural commentary, and protest comics—making any easy categorization impossible.

Regardless of their subject, many of Ormes's cartoons and comics served to advance the cause of racial uplift, important to the *Courier's* editors and columnists, community leaders, and other African Americans. The *Courier's* comics page became a venue for her to extend these messages and to encourage personal advancement and racial pride.

The story of Jackie Ormes would not be complete without a chapter on her Patty-Jo doll. As representations of the human body for children, dolls have long served as markers of self-identity. However brief its production the creation of the beautiful and fashionably attired Patty-Jo doll was an important landmark in black history and a cause for celebration by African American children and their parents.

Although reproductions and likenesses of the doll have been made in recent times, the original Patty-Jo doll was produced from late 1947 to late 1949. Some have speculated that in creating a little girl doll like Patty-Jo a decade after the death of her only child, a daughter, Ormes was able to turn her sad memories into a joyful creative venture that made a positive contribution to the material culture of African American children.

“Every one of these beautiful things were made for a 24-hour news cycle. . . . they weren’t made to last,” Art Spiegelman, a 1992 Pulitzer Prize–winning cartoonist, said about the transitory nature of twentieth-century newspaper comics.⁶ Artists at African American weeklies and their counterparts at mainstream daily papers lavished surprising detail and painstaking craft on work that would be thrown out by consumers with the next day’s trash. The cartoons’ visual and verbal messages were so vital at the time that a few series ran for decades, some passed in relay fashion from artist to artist. A parade of characters like Samuel Milai’s little boy Bucky, Wilbert Holloway’s genial Sunnyboy Sam, and Bill Chase’s glamorous Betty waits in the wings for inevitable rediscovery by future researchers. An encyclopedic study of African American cartoonists needs to be undertaken. As the only black woman cartoonist of the time, Jackie Ormes seems an exceptionally fitting subject with whom to begin that effort.